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## **Ambivalent citizenship and extra-territorial voting among Colombians in London and Madrid**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the nature of extra-territorial voting among Colombian migrants in the 2010 elections in London and Madrid. In addressing the neglected issue of why voter turnout from abroad has been so low by taking into account the views of voters and non-voters alike, the paper highlights that while the external vote privileges the professional and well-educated, this does not mean that migrants are not interested in politics back home. Drawing on Bauman (1991), we conceptualise ambivalent citizenship as the paradoxical manner that hegemonic notions of citizenship through the external vote are imposed by states from above yet embraced in an ambivalent manner from below. It shows that the workings of the state makes voting a difficult process, creating structural ambivalence at the same time as individual ambivalence is exercised among migrants who fail to engage with a political system back home that they do not trust, even if they practice their citizenship in other ways. The conceptualisation of 'ambivalent citizenship' therefore encompasses the contradictory complexities inherent in the provision of external voting rights that actively privileges and excludes migrants in mutually constitutive ways.

## **Key words**

External vote, transnational citizenship, Colombia, ambivalence

## **Introduction**

Two opposing yet interrelated forces fundamentally affect the movement and well-being of international migrants today. On the one hand, receiving governments are imposing ever more stringent controls on the movement and exercise of fundamental rights of international migrants, while on the other, sending country governments are increasingly extending extra-territorial rights for their citizens to facilitate their participation in the politics, societies and economies from afar (Staeheli et al. 2012). These forces conflict and collide in contradictory ways. These processes have important ramifications for conceptualizing citizenship and the role of the nation-state, as well as for understanding the transnational experiences of migrants as they negotiate ever more complex influences on their lives. One important way in which to explore these processes is through migrants' participation in home country elections from abroad. Although research on external voting is burgeoning (Boccagni 2011; Lafleur 2011), there has been a marked absence of work that examines those who engage in the vote and those who do not, as well as among the same migrant group in different host country contexts (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004). Furthermore, there has been little research on why exercising extra-territorial voting is not always enthusiastically embraced once this right has been secured (Collyer 2013).

In addressing these issues, the current paper explores the nature of extra-territorial voting among Colombian migrants in London and Madrid in the context of low turnout rates. It argues that the external vote simultaneously privileges and marginalizes migrants' abilities to exercise their citizenship as status. It suggests that the exercise and non-exercise of extra-territorial voting creates an ambivalent citizenship across borders among voters and non-voters. This in turn, takes on board a comment from Ho (2011: 763) that 'scholarship should pay careful attention to the selective nature of the new extraterritorial citizenship strategies'. Drawing on Bauman (1991), we conceptualise ambivalent citizenship as the paradoxical manner that the external vote is imposed by states from above yet embraced in an ambivalent manner from below in ways that while privileging the better-off does not mean that migrants are not interested in politics back home.

### **Conceptualizing transnational citizenship, extra-territorial voting and ambivalence**

Since the 1990s, there has been a sustained questioning of the relationships between the state, territoriality and the demos in light of processes of globalization and transnational migration (Bauböck 2003, 2007, 2009; Joppke 2007). A core dimension of this is the extent to which the nation-state has diminished in relevance in terms of guaranteeing rights to citizens when they are territorially dispersed. Some talk of a 'post-national citizenship' (Soysal 1994), where rights and identities are separated and where the regulation of political communities extends across borders. In turn, a human rights regime provides a potential framework for claims-making within this (Benhabib 2004). Such celebratory interpretations have since given way to more circumspect views that contend that the nation-state continues to exert a decisive role in regulating citizenship rights and the inclusion and exclusion of certain people from free movement, especially irregular migrants and asylum seekers (Kofman 2005). Part of what can arguably be claimed to reflect the imposition of hegemonic notions of citizenship 'from above' is the emergence of ambivalent attitudes 'from below' in relation to Bauman's (1991) writing on modernity and ambivalence (see below).

These debates around the state and transnationality have provided the conceptual foundations for more nuanced discussions of how citizenship has been re- and de-territorialized as people move around the world and exert their rights in diverse ways (Collyer 2013). This has led to alternative conceptualizations of 'extra-territorial citizenship' such as Bauböck's (2007: 2395) 'transnational citizenship' that is 'a triangular relation between individuals and two or more independent states in which these individuals are simultaneously assigned membership status and membership-based rights or obligations'. Indeed, Bauböck has developed several notions to delineate particular aspects of this such as 'expansive citizenship' (2005) to include non-resident citizens and non-citizen residents and 'external citizenship' (2009), with the latter entailing a debate on whether it is legitimate to confer extra-territorial rights on emigrant populations (see Lafleur 2013). These have been complemented by other similar concepts such as 'extraterritorial citizenship', 'emigrant citizenship' and 'flexible citizenship' (Fitzgerald 2006; Ong 1999).

Increasingly, however, research on multiple and transnational citizenships has highlighted the exclusionary and inclusionary processes at play as different states 'claim their diaspora' (Ho, 2011) and decide who is allowed to be a citizen and exercise their rights and duties and under what conditions (see Sejersen 2008). Indeed, Isin (2002) suggests that an inherent logic of citizenship relates to the creation of the 'alien'. Much work has concentrated on citizenship as a status implying formal state membership and its associated rules and rights (Joppke 2007). Yet, it is now widely acknowledged that citizenship is a practice conditioned by law but also influenced by the act of living in a community (Staeheli et al. 2012). As such, there have been some important conceptualizations such as Mavroudi's (2008) 'pragmatic citizenship' and Ho's (2009) 'emotional citizenship', which signal the move away from more abstract political philosophical debates towards more 'everyday' understandings. Despite recognition of the mutuality between status and practice, empirical research has tended to focus solely on everyday citizenships or on formal citizenship through immigration status and external voting (although see Boccagni 2011; Lafleur 2013). In addition, there remains little research on the interrelations between inclusionary and exclusionary processes that affect or are produced by external voting. Therefore, the aim here is to explore how privilege and

marginalisation are mutually enacted in relation to extra-territorial voting and citizenship in ambivalent ways.

Another important aspect of these processes is how 'homeland politics' (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003) through granting dual citizenship and external voting rights affects integration in host countries. While Jones-Correa (1998) argued that low levels of Latino naturalization and participation in US formal politics result from political marginalization and their situation in a 'politics of in-between', others maintain that transnational participation can coexist with or accelerate migrant political integration (Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Portes et al. 2008). Underpinning this is the need to recognize why sending states have extended dual citizenship and extra-territorial voting rights in the first place. Although some have suggested that granting the external vote is part of efforts on the part of states to engage their diaspora in order to promote a 'modern' view to the world (Russell 2011), most perceive the spread of such rights in more instrumental terms, albeit often as a result of migrant campaigning. These can include capturing migrants' economic contributions through remittances or securing political support (Bauböck 2009; Collyer 2013), but also the evolution of domestic politics (Lafleur 2011). Invariably such rights are implemented in a 'top-down' manner that targets elites or assumes homogeneity among diasporic populations (Ho, 2013). Although research has begun to explore the nature of voter turnout in external elections with many highlighting low or variable levels of engagement (Boccagni 2011; Escriva et al. 2010; Lafleur 2013; Lafleur and Calderón Chelius 2011), more research is needed on why migrants do not vote even when formally enfranchised (Collyer 2013).

A further dimension of these debates relates to research on informal political and civic activities of migrants more widely, which while not always couched in terms of citizenship, is often central to understanding migrants' attitudes towards external voting (Escobar et al. 2014a). This is especially because of the overlaps between formal and informal political engagement and how involvement in civic activities often leads to formal or electoral participation (Bermudez, 2010, 2011a, 2011b; Martiniello and Lafleur 2008), especially when the political opportunity structure and other contextual factors are conducive (Morales and Pilati 2013; Però and Solomos 2010). Central to these debates is that migrants' social identities influence their engagement (McIlwaine and Bermudez 2011). In particular, it is widely acknowledged that the most educated and professional are most likely to vote (Bauböck 2009; Portes et al. 2008) even if this is not universally found (see Morales and Pilati 2013). However, little is said about the role of non-voters and their attitudes towards expatriate voting in terms of both distant and close forms of citizenship (Collyer 2013).

The final area of conceptualisation relates to ambivalence in terms of citizenship and extra-territorial voting. Ambivalence as a concept has been used in various ways by sociologists and psychologists for many years, with a distinction often drawn between individual and structural ambivalence. Connidis and McMullin (2002: 565) usefully suggest that there is an interplay between these levels: 'ambivalence is created by the contradictions and paradoxes that are imbedded in sets of structured social relations (e.g. class, age, race, ethnicity, gender) through which opportunities, rights, and privileges are differentially distributed'. There is considerable resonance here as to how migrants negotiate their citizenship rights in differential ways. Also relevant to how ambivalence is conceptualised in terms of citizenship rights is Bauman's (1991) ideas of ambivalence as disorder, discomfort or threat that exists in juxtaposition to as well as in tandem with modernity. While Bauman talks of controlling

ambivalence as a way of imposing order, he also posits that such efforts can only lead to intolerance and a series of inclusions and exclusions (p.8). Although he states that modernity has gradually come to terms with living with difference and tolerating the ambivalent standing of the 'stranger' (p.15), it is interesting here to think about how ambivalence emerges among those whom acts of modernity are imposed upon – in this case, the Colombian state initiating legislation in an effort to capture political and economic contributions among its citizens abroad.

While the concept of ambivalence has rarely been directly linked with citizenship (although see Jans 2004 on children's citizenship), we suggest that this is a fruitful coupling in relation to extra-territorial voting. Not only is there an uneasy relationship between modernity and ambivalence as discussed by Bauman, but citizenship in its formal manifestation has also been defined as a core dimension of modernity. Again, the idea of imposing citizenship as a way of ensuring modernity ties-in with Secor's (2004: 359) ideas of citizenship 'as a set of hegemonic practices and discourses [that], assembles and naturalizes the subject positions of citizen and stranger'. The ambivalence emerges when these hegemonic forms are extended from afar transnationally, in this case, through the right to vote in home country elections while residing abroad. We argue that the ways in which hegemonic forms of formal citizenship are offered through extra-territorial voting create an 'ambivalent citizenship' that is more in line with Ong's (1996) notion of 'cultural citizenship'. The latter refers to the cultural practices produced from contestations with the state as people negotiate their belonging through 'a dual process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the nation- state and civil society' (1996: 738). Therefore, states with large populations living abroad effectively try to impose an 'order' on their diaspora through formally extending citizenship rights through the external vote. Yet evidence shows that this right often exercised by a minority; the citizenship exercised from abroad is an ambivalent one as both voters and non-voters feel a belonging to their homeland, but not all feel they want to formally express this through engaging in elections. Although re-conceptualisations of citizenship among transnational migrants abound, our conceptualisation of 'ambivalent citizenship' aims to capture a more dynamic interpretation of how migrants react to the provision of external voting rights in ways that incorporate the formal and the socio-cultural dimensions of exercising citizenship, facilitated through an analysis of those who do and do not vote from abroad. It also aims to encompass the 'fractures and fissures of the new extra-territorial citizenship strategies' (Ho 2001: 763) as different groups of migrants react differentially and ambivalently to the order that is potentially being imposed on them.

Bearing these issues in mind and the fact that understanding the dynamics of expatriate voting is ever more pressing given the major under-estimation of the extent to which extra-territorial political rights are conferred around the world today (Collyer and Vathi, 2007), the discussion now turns to the analysis of the external vote of Colombian migrants in Madrid and London during the 2010 congressional and presidential elections in relation to constructions of ambivalent citizenship.

### **Contextualising processes of extra-territorial voting among Colombians in the UK and Spain**

Much research on external voting emphasises low turnout rates that appear to challenge the legitimacy of external citizenship (Bauböck 2007, 2009) despite its obvious symbolic relevance (Boccagni 2011). The case of Colombians abroad is a stark example of this in that

they enjoy generous formal political rights with regard to the home country since they can hold dual citizenship, vote from abroad in presidential and congressional elections and elect representatives of the diaspora. These rights were first granted in the 1960s (for presidential elections) in response to the concerns of political elites exiled abroad, and were expanded at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century following attempts from 'above' to legitimize the political system and demands from 'below' for greater and more inclusionary democracy (Bermudez et al. 2014). To date, Colombians residing abroad have been able to participate in 14 presidential elections, have voted six times in senatorial elections and on four occasions they have chosen their representatives to the lower chamber (Restrepo de Acosta 2007).<sup>1</sup> For the 1962 presidential election, when provisions for external voting were first applied, 3,277 nationals registered outside the country. Since then, Colombian migration abroad has grown exponentially. However, the number of registered external voters has increased at a much lower pace, while turnout for the presidential poll over the last decade has experienced a downward trend from almost 65 per cent in 2002, when participation was higher abroad than inside the country, to 25 per cent in the first round and 23 per cent in the second round in 2010. By comparison, turnout inside the country during the same period averaged 47 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

Focusing on the UK which has a relatively established Colombian population since the 1970s albeit only around 50,000 in number (McIlwaine 2011; 2012a) and Spain where migration has been more recent but where the community is much larger at around 223,000 (official figures from the municipal registries for 2012, *Instituto Nacional de Estadística*) allows for a comparison in extra-territorial voting processes because of particularly low turnout rates. Official data for the 2010 elections show that the electoral participation in both countries was among the lowest globally. In 2010, Colombians were able to vote in congressional elections in March (to renew all 102 members of the Senate and 166 representatives of the lower chamber; one of the latter for a congress member abroad) and again in the first round of presidential elections in May and the second round in June (the latter because no candidate won a majority). In total, there were 948 polling tables installed in more than 50 countries. In the UK, Colombians were only able to vote in the consulate in London. Here, the turnout rate for the first round of the presidential elections was 23.3 per cent, declining to 19.4 per cent in the second round. Turnout in Spain (where it was possible to vote in Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao, Seville, Valencia, Palma de Mallorca and Palma de Gran Canaria) was even lower at only 15.7 per cent in the first round and 13.8 per cent in the second. In terms of the results, Jaime Buenahora from the liberal-conservative Social Party of National Unity (*Partido Social de Unidad Social* also referred to as *Partido de la U*) was voted in as the congress representative from abroad. In the presidential elections, Juan Manuel Santos also from the *Partido de la U* won 69 per cent of the vote in a second round, defeating Antanas Mockus from the Green Party (27.5 per cent). In the UK, Mockus won the second round with 50.2 per cent of the vote (Santos had 47.9 per cent) while in Spain, Santos won with 56 per cent while Mockus attained 41.9 per cent (McIlwaine et al. 2011: 6).

Reflecting patterns everywhere, turnout from abroad in the 2010 elections was considerably lower than in the previous presidential poll in 2006. In Spain, the total votes cast were almost 15 percent lower than in 2006, and in the UK 10.5 percent lower. This contrasts with the higher level of participation of other Andean migrants in home country elections (between 74 per cent and 43 per cent, in some cases explained by the obligatory nature of the vote) (Araujo 2010), but has to be set in a context of generally low levels of participation from

abroad (Calderón Chelius 2003).<sup>3</sup> In addition, electoral participation in Colombia has been historically modest when compared with other countries in the region (with average turnouts below 50 per cent). The reasons for this include difficulties in accessing voting sites and registration and apathy towards a political system with a complex multitude of personalized parties (Escobar 2007). In addition, the armed conflict that many Colombians leave behind is also thought to play a part (Guarnizo et al. 2003). The continuous decline in participation is now being called into question, in part given the cost of running elections abroad.

Turning to the methodological framework for the research, a mixed methods approach was adopted. First, it entailed a series of four questionnaire surveys combined into one large sample of 829 Colombians in London and Madrid, of which 415 were approached outside the consulates on the election days (in March for the congressional poll and in May for the first round of the presidential ballot). The other 414 Colombians were surveyed both before the congressional and presidential elections in a range of places in London and Madrid frequented by Colombians such as shopping centres, restaurants, cafes and outside the consulates. The questionnaires were administered in person, and included short questions on socio-demographic characteristics, nature of civic and political participation in home and host countries, and issues relating to voting preferences.<sup>4</sup> Second, was a series of in-depth interviews with Colombian migrants in London and Madrid undertaken mainly after the presidential elections aimed at gaining more in-depth knowledge of transnational political practices. Interviewees were selected using previous contacts and snowball methods, and included 19 in London (11 men and 8 women) and 10 in Madrid (3 men and 7 women). For the survey, a convenient sampling strategy was used given the difficulties inherent in using other methods. The analysis of the survey does not aim to provide a full statistical examination mainly due to the sample sizes (but see Escobar et al. 2014a, 2014b for such an analysis).

Considering the profile of the sample, there was a slight majority of men with a significant proportion who had been living in London or Madrid for a relatively long period of time and had stable migratory status linked with the length of time both communities have been established. Some 35 per cent had naturalized and a similar percentage held a residence permit. There were more citizens or residents in Madrid than London related to the fact that Latin American migrants in Spain can apply for citizenship after two years of legal residence. The migrants surveyed had high levels of formal education, with more than half having higher level education (19 per cent of those had postgraduate qualifications); this was especially marked in London (72 per cent had tertiary level). Nevertheless, this is not reflected in their occupational status in that more than a quarter (27.5 per cent) of all those surveyed worked in elementary jobs (including cleaners, chambermaids, security guards, etc.). Professional and managerial occupations together constituted only 19 per cent of all occupations (see also McIlwaine et al. 2011; also McIlwaine 2012a). In terms of differences between cities, there were many more students in London than in Madrid (22 per cent compared with 3 per cent); slightly more working in elementary jobs in Madrid compared with London (30 per cent compared with 25 per cent); and nearly twice as many professional and managerial workers in London compared with Madrid (24.5 per cent compared with 14 per cent).



## **Ambivalence across borders I: participating in the 2010 Colombian elections from London and Madrid**

Participation in homeland politics through the external vote is not just about the nature of political activities across borders, but also about how various political memberships intersect within and beyond home and host countries (Baubock 2003). The focus of much of this research has been on individual predictors of voting among migrants who participate (Lafleur and Calderón Chelius 2011; Morales and Giugni, 2011) and their reasons for engaging, with much less on those who do not. The empirical analysis in this and subsequent sections aims to move beyond an identification of factors that induce people to vote or not but also to explore how conceptualisations of ambivalence in relation to exercising external voting rights can provide insights into people's voting behaviour. In particular, it focuses on the ambivalences that are created through the varying inclusions and exclusions that result from the differential distribution of rights and privilege and suggests that conceptualising citizenship in this way can capture the paradoxes that emerge.

The case of Colombians voting abroad in the UK and Spain shows that the processes of exclusion and inclusion are not clear-cut between voters and non-voters but rather that there are ambivalences inherent in people's voting behaviour, not least because of variations in host country context. On one hand, voters in both countries had higher levels of education, worked in professional and managerial jobs with higher incomes than those who did not vote (referring to those who declared they had no intention of voting). On the other, although slightly more men than women voted with more women than men stating intentions not to vote, the differentials were minimal. Differences did emerge between London and Madrid reflecting the specific characteristics of the community and structural factors in each city. For example, while 60 per cent of all voters in both countries had some form of tertiary education, this was especially marked in London where more than a third (35 per cent) had postgraduate qualifications compared with 15 per cent in Madrid. In turn, while a quarter of all voters were elementary workers, in Madrid they comprised 28 per cent compared with 21 per cent in London. With another quarter of voters working in professional and managerial occupations across both contexts, this proportion was higher in London (29 per cent) than in Madrid (16 per cent). Linked with the more marked effects of the global economic crisis on Spain than in the UK (McIlwaine 2012b), levels of unemployment were also higher among voters in Madrid (15 per cent, compared with 2 per cent in London). The other notable difference was the higher number of student voters in London than in Madrid (22 per cent compared with 3 per cent); the desire to learn English as well as to study in what is still perceived to be a prestigious higher education system are major draws for Colombians to move to the UK (McIlwaine 2012b). Although voters in both cities were certainly more privileged compared to those who stated that they would not vote, this was clearly mediated by factors affecting the socio-economic and political regimes in the countries of voting. The characteristics of the Colombian communities in each city underpinned these differences linked with the nature of formal and informal institutional mechanisms that encourage or discourage engagement (Bermúdez 2010; Morales and Pilati 2013). Indeed, while migrants in London were more established than in Madrid, voters were more likely to have resided for a shorter time; for example, in London, 20 per cent of voters had lived for less than a year compared with only 5 per cent in Madrid. In turn, non-voters in both cities were more established than voters in that 60 per cent had lived in both cities for more than 6

years and especially in Madrid (65 per cent – compared to 54.5 per cent of those in London).

Yet, somewhat contradictorily, it also emerged that being a citizen or resident in the host country was more likely to encourage migrants to exercise their citizenship rights back home, reflecting Baubock's (2003) notion of multiple political memberships, and corroborating research elsewhere (Portes et al. 2008). Indeed, in both cities, 61 per cent of all voters had residency or citizenship compared with 39 per cent of non-voters, with this playing a slightly more important role in London than Madrid. As such, ambivalence appears to build up over time yet somewhat paradoxically, migrants are much more likely to vote if they have secure immigration status. At the same time, the paradox can also be explained by the fact that those with less secure status were less likely to engage with the consulates and formal bureaucracy (see below).

Linked with this, is that non-voters were also generally more excluded from the British and Spanish polities than their voting counterparts since they were more likely to have an irregular migrant status or be students and less likely to be British or Spanish citizens. This intersects with their voting behaviour in the host nation, as rights to vote are usually conferred only on those with citizenship or a required length of residency. For instance, 63 per cent of those who voted in Colombian elections also voted in host local elections (especially in London – 80 per cent, compared with 38 per cent in Madrid); only 43 per cent of non-voters participated. In general elections, 65 per cent of Colombian voters took part (again especially in London – 77 per cent, - compared with 48 per cent in Madrid); while only 43 per cent of non-voters took part in host countries (see Lafleur and Calderón Chelius 2011). Still, the fact that almost half of the Colombians who said they had no intention of exercising their external vote actually participated in host country elections is significant, especially in the case of the UK where the community remains largely invisible in the eyes of the British political parties. Equally surprising is that Colombians in Madrid, despite having easier access to regularisation and naturalisation, have lower levels of participation in formal politics of Spain.

These patterns of participation again suggest that while there are marked patterns of those who live more marginalised lives in London and Madrid being excluded or choosing to exclude themselves from political systems, there are also some notable ambivalences. Despite the contention that transnational politics can theoretically at least offer the excluded more opportunities to participate (Itzigsohn 2000), evidence from the Colombian external vote suggests that this might not be the case of formal electoral politics. Instead, intentionally or unintentionally, the external vote courts a certain type of migrant with more established immigration status, higher levels of education and occupational standing resulting in elites self-selecting. This reinforces the wider aims of the state to capture those with most potential influence (Ho 2011). Yet, ambivalences also emerge in response to this as migrants develop their citizenship practices in other 'partial' ways both formally and informally. For instance, 43 per cent of non-voters in the Colombian elections actually voted in host country polls. Having established that migrants have contradictory and paradoxical responses to being provided with the right to vote from abroad in relation to the broad patterns, the following sections examine the underlying dynamics of these processes in more depth.

## **Ambivalence across borders II: exploring voter turnout**

With such low turnout rates as a whole, it is important to explore how and why such ambivalence occurs beyond the individual characteristics of voters and non-voters (see Boccagni 2011). In addressing this in the context of Mexico, Lafleur and Calderón Chelius (2011) suggest two hypotheses: the 'bureaucratic barrier hypothesis' whereby legislators intentionally make it difficult for citizens abroad to vote through complicated and restricted registration systems with the aim of reducing the influence of this constituency; and the 'migrants disinterest hypothesis' where apathy and distance are assumed to reduce desire to engage in homeland affairs. Ambivalence can result from the intersection of both sets of factors as migrants respond to structural and institutional barriers as well as develop their own individual reactions influenced by their social and economic position (reflecting Connidis and McMullin's 2002 different levels of ambivalence), which in this case relates to their transnational situation.

Addressing the bureaucratic barriers that placed important institutional obstacles in the way of voting, difficulties in the registration processes presented a major problem for migrants. For the 2010 elections, Colombians abroad not only had to register at the consulates, but had to have a new *cédula* (national identification card) beforehand. Among those who stated they would not vote across both countries, 30 per cent had not obtained this document and 74 per cent had not registered. However, obtaining a new *cédula* did not necessarily mean that people would vote. For example, among those who explicitly stated that they did not intend to vote, 49 per cent had a new *cédula*. This was especially marked in Madrid where 64 per cent of those with a *cédula* stated they would not vote compared with 38 per cent in London. The problems of registration were further exacerbated by the short time frame given for this process (15 days in the November prior to the first elections the following March). This was discussed by 38 year old Patricia<sup>5</sup> who had been living in Madrid since 2009:

'Giving only 2 weeks to register your *cédula*, it's far too short a time. It needs to be at least a month because there are people who find it difficult, who are working ... they didn't publicize it very well. Many people were left without their vote because of this. Why? I ask. I don't know. Is it because it's in the interest of the government? I think so'.

A general lack of information about the elections was also discussed, as 30 year old Isabel in London who did not vote in the 2010 elections noted:

'If I had had a bit more of ... encouragement from the environment, if I had had more information maybe I would have been more interested in voting, but at the same time, the despair of not knowing for whom to vote and then?'

The lack of voting stations and facilities was also criticized, often in combination with other structural and individual factors. The fact that people worked long and irregular hours and often earned low salaries acted as a major disincentive to making the effort to register, let alone actually voting. This problem was even more of an issue in the UK, since the only voting station was located in London. Emilio, a 32-year old Green Party (*Partido Verde*) campaigner who had been living there since 2005, pointed this out:

'But remember that people here work lots of extra hours ... Monday to Monday. First, they have to take a day off, sacrifice their work, second, they have to pay transport

that is expensive, not just in London, but if someone lives in Oxford or Cambridge they have to come here and that costs £40 or £50 plus not working that day ... the effort is huge'.

The registration process also discouraged migrants with irregular status to participate despite being permitted to as Colombian citizens. Irregular status is closely bound-up with a range of fear and anxiety that discourage full engagement with the host society (McIlwaine 2014a) even if it entails transnational involvement. Emilio continued:

'If you are a legal Colombian ... then you're registered at the consulate. But illegal people say: "one day the consulate will pass the information to the Home Office and I will be busted". Therefore, they are not registered. Those of us who are registered are a minority'.

It could therefore be argued that the actions of the Colombian state has led in part to the construction of an ambivalent citizenship among its people residing abroad whereby they are ostensibly provided with the opportunity to formally exercise their rights, yet where this can be difficult to achieve in reality through the various institutional obstacles to exercising their vote.

Such intentionality can rarely be taken in isolation, and it is important to also consider how individual migrants' interest in politics intersects with these challenges (Lafleur and Calderón Chelius 2011). Indeed, lack of interest was the most common reason cited for not voting in previous Colombian elections (cited by 26 per cent). Again, somewhat paradoxically one third of all Colombians surveyed (32.5 per cent) said they were very interested in Colombian politics in general, especially in Madrid despite participation levels been lower than in London. As it might be expected, those who voted were more likely to be very interested in Colombian politics (50 per cent) compared with non-voters (8 per cent); in turn, 43 per cent of non-voters had no or little interest, even if 8 per cent of voters reported this too. Considering social identities, older, male, more educated and professional migrants were the most interested. In addition, living away from Colombia for a long period of time appeared to reinforce lack of interest in that those who had lived in London or Madrid for 6-10 years were the most likely to report no interest at all, followed closely by those whose length of residence was over 11 years. For example, Andres who was in his 40s and from Cali moved to London in 1990 where he lived for 10 years without legal papers before attaining his citizenship in 2000. He said he felt 'disconnected' from Colombia because he had been away for so long and was indifferent to Colombian politics. Not surprisingly, he had no intention of voting. This highlights another dimension of ambivalence in relation to the external vote as for many people there appeared to be a disconnection between interest in politics and voting. In addition, the interplay between the ways in which rights are exercised is clearly embedded in structured power relations of class, age and gender which also produce their own set of contradictions.

Such ambivalence on the part of migrants was further compounded by the nature of the election campaigns abroad. Although some parties and candidates organized events in Madrid and London, the geographical distance and costs involved as well as the fewer potential voters meant that elections were not lived as intensely in Europe as in other countries where Colombian communities have settled. Those most likely to be following the

campaigns closely were again, male, voters, living in Madrid, with postgraduate qualifications and working in professional and managerial jobs. This was partly linked with the fact that three-quarters of migrants obtained information about the campaigns through the internet, especially in London (83 per cent compared with 64 per cent in Madrid). It is perhaps no coincidence that the Green Party won in London given their extensive use of the internet and social networking as ways of contacting and reaching people.

However, the assumption that exclusion from politics affects non-voters uniformly is also not the case in relation to the extent to which people discussed politics, which is arguably a more active type of engagement than just been interested in politics and one that is often seen as a determinant of wider participation. In our case, 18 per cent of all Colombians said they spoke about Colombian politics on a daily basis and an additional 23 per cent weekly. As would be expected, voters talked about politics more frequently than non-voters. Still, among the latter, almost 19 per cent said they talked about Colombian politics daily or weekly.

Beyond these barriers that impede voter turnout, the so-called 'habit effect' (Waldinger et al. 2012) also played a role in that those who participated in previous elections back home were more likely to practice the external vote (74 per cent); nevertheless, 58 per cent of those with no intention of voting had voted previously. This invokes Baubock's (2003) multiple political memberships in that those voting in external elections were also more likely to have been active voters back home. Related with this, and despite claims of overlap between formal and informal political activities among migrants, participation in civic activities was generally low among Colombians in London and Madrid even if voters were slightly more likely to be involved than non-voters (16 per cent compared with 11 per cent) (see Landolt and Goldring 2010). Therefore, more informal civic political engagement does not necessarily fill the 'partial spaces' (Ho 2010) left by exclusion from the external vote. Instead, an informal interest in politics manifested through frequent discussion appears to contribute to the everyday experiences of ambivalent Colombian citizenship from afar. However, it is also important to explore people's attitudes towards voting both in previous elections back home and in the external vote.

In terms of why people participated in the electoral process or not, the most commonly cited reason for engaging in previous elections back home was to support ideas (62 per cent), followed some way behind by supporting a political party (16 per cent), and a specific politician (12 per cent). Another 4 per cent said that they wanted to support the democratic system and to exercise their rights as citizens (although for some this was also included in the notion of 'supporting ideas'). The notion of civic and democratic duty is reflected in 28 year old Sandra's case who had been living in Madrid since 2008 and who came from a left-wing family. Her reasons for voting were shared by many:

'I used to vote ... because it is a way to strengthen the party system, also to demand, in terms of militancy, in terms of compliance ... of having a voice, of being represented in Parliament, I think that is very important ... I have always thought that the vote is the founding principle of democracy, isn't it?'

Yet while many cited such a duty as important, they also felt compromised creating more contradictory feelings. A deep-seated mistrust of the Colombian political system especially in

terms of corruption influenced many who did not vote back home. Marisol who was 42 years old and migrated to London in 1988 had not voted previously in Colombia stated:

“Because, look, the truth is, look at the politicians, at the politics in Colombia, they say it’s better now, and I think it is. But years ago, everything was robbery. This is what we call a vicious circle in that only the politicians come out of it with any benefits. They don’t care about helping the people”.

This was further exacerbated by the armed conflict and an associated fear of becoming involved, as 39 year old Hernan who had lived in London since 1996 stated:

‘it’s the power to express oneself that is important ... in my country I don’t know up to what point it’s possible to express oneself freely, because if you say something bad ... it can be dangerous ... so much so that it’s possible to lose your life for speaking out ... so what democracy is there?’

Fear is a core aspect of ambivalence among Colombians against the backdrop of the armed conflict and widespread insecurity that prompted many to leave their homeland. However, this fear is often replaced with other anxieties linked with living as a migrant or a ‘stranger’ abroad (McIlwaine 2014b). Yet these attitudes were also equivocal in that for many Colombians who voted, migration awakened or renewed an interest in politics. For example, 31 year old Angelina had lived in London since 1997. In Colombia, she did not participate in politics because she knew people that supported the Patriotic Union party (*Union Patriótica*) who had been killed for being involved. However, in 2003-4, she began to become involved with MIRA (*Movimiento Independiente de Renovación Absoluta* – a right-wing political party linked with the evangelical church). She joined with them because of:

“the ideals they have ... the thoughts, the desire to help people. Because independently of any group I liked to help people who needed it ... When I met the people from MIRA who wanted to do the same, I thought I would join them’.

Migrants’ political awakening was also due to a realisation that social inequalities were very marked in Colombia compared with their new home. For Miguel (see above): ‘It caused me a big shock, the inequality of my conditions ... it opened my eyes’. In a similar way, Emilio reported in relation to inequality in Colombia:

‘It awakens filaments that were sleeping and one thinks, I have to do something. I am not in Colombia but I have to do something about it ... I have to participate somehow’.

A concern for migrants’ experiences of discrimination abroad was also important for many such as Marcos who was in his 40s and who arrived in London in 2000 fleeing persecution owing to his human rights work:

‘The main issue is that Colombian immigrants are treated like third class citizens in this country and they have been completely abandoned by our country. This is despite the fact that the country lives off what Colombian immigrants produce.’

While external voting was certainly important for some in terms of exercising citizenship rights, voters and non-voters alike felt a strong sense of belonging to Colombia that some also defined in relation to citizenship. Ana Maria who was 32 and had been living in London since 2003 and did not vote expressed her contradictory feelings towards the UK and Colombia:

‘Citizenship is where you belong, the community that you belong to ... I think I’m 100 per cent Colombian ... I don’t feel British. I would need more years. I don’t feel it in my heart yet, not because I don’t like it here, but it’s like my mother, you understand’.

Participation in the external vote is therefore only one aspect of expressing citizenship; people such as Ana Maria did not vote but felt that citizenship was about settling into her new community in London. Many migrants who did not vote expressed very strong feelings towards their homeland at the same time as they embraced their new lives. Wilfred who was in his 40s and had lived in London for a year said that his Spanish passport was only important to use for work and travel but that he would never forget where he came from: ‘Denying your nationhood is like denying your mother’. Yet many migrants felt that external voting had little meaning for them or at the very least they felt equivocal for the reasons outlined above linked with both structural and individual ambivalences.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the nature of extra-territorial voting among Colombian migrants in London and Madrid in the 2010 elections. Empirically, the paper has contributed not only to the neglected issue of examining one nationality’s experiences of the external vote in different host country contexts, but also why voter turnout has been so low by taking into account the views of voters and non-voters alike. Although the external vote privileges the views of well-educated, professional citizens, yet . This can be interpreted as a result of the workings of the state that makes voting a difficult process, creating structural ambivalence, as well as the effects of migrants failing to engage with a political system back home that they do not trust, exacerbated by length of residence abroad and distance from the country, generating individual ambivalence. At the same time, the host country context affects participation in relation to migration regimes and wider migrant trajectories in a given place.

Conceptually, we suggest that a form of ambivalent citizenship is experienced among the Colombian diaspora that simultaneously privileges and marginalizes migrants’ abilities and desires to exercise their citizenship through the external vote. Drawing on Bauman (1991) and others, we suggest that hegemonic notions of citizenship imposed ‘from above’ in the form of providing extra-territorial voting rights intersect with ambivalent attitudes ‘from below’. Thus, the citizenship that is exercised from abroad is an ambivalent one as both voters and non-voters may feel a belonging to their homeland, but not all feel they want to formally express this through engaging in home country elections. In turn, this does not mean that the non-voters are disinterested in homeland politics or expressing their citizenship in other ways. Therefore, the conceptualisation of ‘ambivalent citizenship’ encompasses the contradictory complexities inherent in the provision of external voting rights by the home state in terms of the often alienating way in which it is carried out creating structural ambivalence as well as the emergence of individual ambivalence through disinterest or fear. We suggest then that the notion of ambivalent citizenship captures the dynamic and complex way in which the external vote operates in a formal sense and migrants’ attitudes towards it

in a more informal manner with both processes actively privileging and excluding migrants in mutually constitutive ways.

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### Notes

1. Data from the Registraduría Nacional website: (<http://www.registraduria.gov.co/-Historico-de-Resultados->) (accessed 20 August 2014).
2. For the 2014 elections, 560,000 Colombians were registered to vote from abroad (the diaspora is estimated at 5 million). The participation rate among external voters for the 2014 presidential poll was only 20 per cent in the second round globally. Nationally, turnout during the second round of the presidential election was 48 per cent.
3. In Spain, the turnout for the 2008 general election was 32 per cent (this fell to 5 per cent in 2011 following the introduction of new rules for Spaniards abroad. In the UK general election, turnout was 65.1 per cent (<http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/nov/16/uk-election-turnouts-historic>).
4. The questionnaire was also administered in New York, Miami and Paris as part of a larger project not included here (see Escobar et al. 2014a, 2014b).
5. All names are pseudonyms.

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